Great poets of the 20th century

Sylvia Plath

Foreword by Margaret Drabble

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Sylvia Plath

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Interviews in this series:
1 TS Eliot, foreword by Craig Raine
2 WH Auden, foreword by Rowan Williams
3 Sylvia Plath, foreword by Margaret Drabble
4 Philip Larkin, foreword by Andrew Motion
5 Ted Hughes, foreword by Jeanette Winterson
6 Seamus Heaney, foreword by John Banville
7 Siegfried Sassoon, foreword by William Boyd
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Foreword
Margaret Drabble

Sylvia Plath was the first poet to write great poetry about childbirth. Her suicide at the age of 30 made her a legend, but she left a legacy far richer than the story of her tragic death. Her poetry is appalling but it is also exhilarating. She embodied a seismic shift in consciousness which enabled us to feel and think as we do today, and of which she was a supremely vulnerable and willing casualty. She changed our world.

She was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932, and for most of the first two decades of her life appeared to play the role of dutiful American daughter and exemplary A-grade scholarship student. But the sudden death of her German-born father, Otto Plath, when she was eight inflicted psychic damage which she nursed, explored, inflamed, and was to turn into triumphant and terrible verse for the rest of her life. He died of undiagnosed diabetes after a leg amputation, and the theme of surgery, pathology, bereavement and unresolved loss surges through her poetry, culminating in one of her most famous poems, Daddy, where the lost father and the unfaithful husband merge in an extraordinary sequence of images drawn from the Holocaust. In Plath's work, the personal spreads into the cosmic and the local explodes into the universal. Some have judged her a tragedy queen, self-aggrandising and histrionic, but perhaps she may be better seen as a vessel through which the horrors of history were permitted to pour.

In 1953, while still at college, she had a mental breakdown culminating in a suicide attempt and was treated with ECT, an experience which, like her father's death, was to provide her with a store of images, and which she describes in her one novel, The Bell Jar. She recovered to make the fateful journey to England where, in Cambridge, she met Ted Hughes, whom she married in 1956. Their careers collided in a period of creativity and mutual inspiration; they were acknowledged as the stars of their generation. Their work was primal, visceral, intensely physical. Technically accomplished, both wrote from the body, not the head.

England also had a profound influence on her. When she was living with her two small children in an old farmhouse in north Devon, she immersed herself, wilfully, in the countryside and its rituals – learning to ride a horse (an experience which she describes in the title poem of Ariel), keeping bees (as her father had done), attending church, pretending to be a country wife. The bee poems are some of her finest, and she valued them highly; the black danger and honey sweetness of the hives and swarms gripped her imagination as a symbol of the mixed sources of productivity and power. The moon and the elm in the churchyard form a dark gothic landscape, with its roots stretching far back into the traditions of English verse. She had uprooted herself from New England and transplanted herself in an alien and ancient natural order.

Yet she was also innovative and joyful. Her poems about her children – Morning Song, You're, Nick and the Candlestick – are, I believe, the first poems ever to celebrate the pleasures of breast feeding. She evokes the independent being of a baby, the power and mystery of the maternal bond. She struggled with her role as a Good Wife of the 1950s, oppressed by her husband's greater freedom and an uncomfortable, angry, vestigial sense of duty, but her delight in her children flows irrepressibly. Writing to her mother of the birth of her son Nick, she describes how "this great bluish, glistening boy shot out onto the bed in a wave of tidal water that drenched all four of us to the skin, howling lustily." The colour and energy of this childbed description (which appears in several poems) struck those of us who were her contemporaries as something wholly new in literature. Here was a whole new world of sensation, familiar throughout women's history, but at last captured and acknowledged in words. It was a broken taboo, a new dawn of freedom.

It was also, for her, the end. In the bitter winter of 1963, on February 11, alone with her children in a London flat, she killed herself, having made sure that the children would survive. The conflict of her multiple selves – poet, wife, mother – had overpowered her. Many of us learned of her death a week later in the Observer which published some of her last poems, including Edge. The physical shock of reading that perfect poem, in which motherhood came to its dead end, has never left me. It seemed to freeze our hopes in horror and defeat. But it was not so. She had died, but her work was done. Her message, if we are strong enough to hear it, is also a message of hope: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring."

Sylvia Plath

You're

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do.
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, my little loaf.

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.

The Swarm

Somebody is shooting at something in our town –
A dull pom, pom in the Sunday street.
Jealousy can open the blood,
It can make black roses.
Who are they shooting at?

It is you the knives are out for
At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon,
The hump of Elba on your short back,
And the snow, marshaling its brilliant cutlery
Mass after mass, saying Shh!

Ssh! These are chess people you play with,
Still figures of ivory.
The mud squirms with throats,
Stepping stones for French bootsoles.
The gilt and pink domes of Russia melt and float off

In the furnace of greed. Clouds, clouds.
So the swarm balls and deserts
Seventy feet up, in a black pine tree.
It must be shot down. Pom! Pom!
So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder.

It thinks they are the voice of God
Condoning the beak, the claw, the grin of the dog
Yellow-haunched, a pack-dog,
Grinning over its bone of ivory
Like the pack, the pack, like everybody.

The bees have got so far. Seventy feet high!
Russia, Poland and Germany!
The mild hills, the same old magenta
Fields shrunk to a penny
Spun into a river, the river crossed.

The bees argue, in their black ball,
A flying hedgehog, all prickles.
The man with gray hands stands under the honeycomb
Of their dream, the hived station
Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs,

Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country.
Pom! Pom! They fall
Dismembered, to a tod of ivy.
So much for the charioteers, the outriders, the Grand Army!
A red tatter, Napoleon!

The last badge of victory.
The swarm is knocked into a cocked straw hat.
Elba, Elba, bleb on the sea!
The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals
Worming themselves into niches.

How instructive this is!
The dumb, banded bodies
Walking the plank draped with Mother France's upholstery
Into a new mausoleum,
An ivory palace, a crotch pine.

The man with gray hands smiles –
The smile of a man of business, intensely practical.
They are not hands at all
But asbestos receptacles.
Pom! Pom! 'They would have killed *me*.'

Stings big as drawing pins!
It seems bees have a notion of honor,
A black intractable mind.
Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything.
O Europe! O ton of honey!

The Applicant

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.

We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit –

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of *that*?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Ariel

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! – The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks –

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air –
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel –
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? –

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot –
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash –
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Edge

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

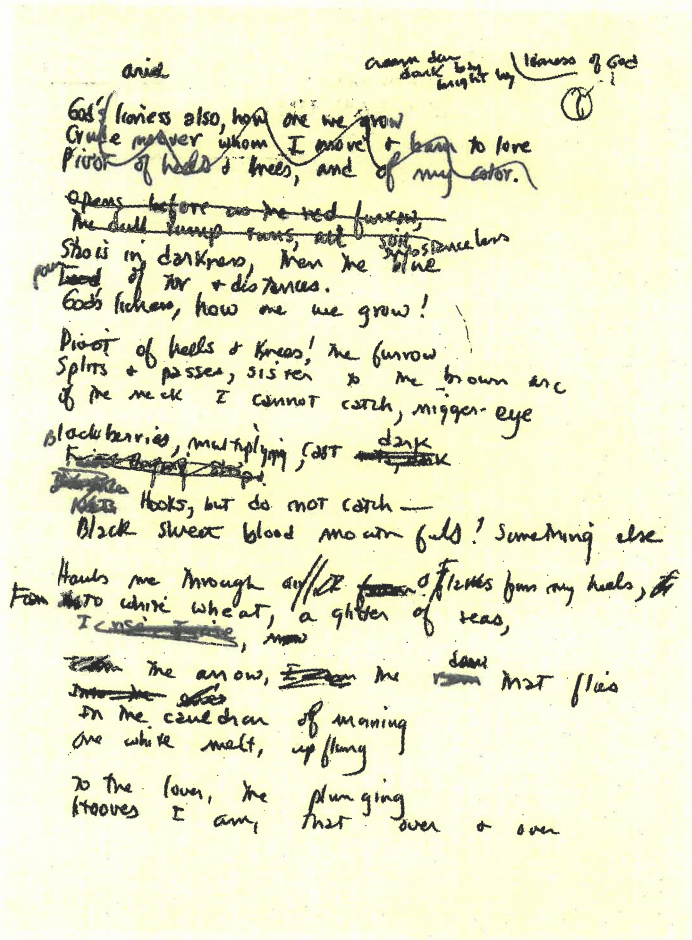
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.



Facsimile manuscript of Ariel, published posthumously in 1965

From the Guardian and Observer archives

The Ransom Note
By Bernard Bergonzi
November 25 1960

As a rule the work of women poets is marked by intensity of feeling and fineness of perception rather than by outstanding technical accomplishment. Miss Sylvia Plath is, however, a young American poetess whose work is most immediately noticeable for the virtuoso qualities of its style. In The Colossus (Heinemann, 15s), which is her first collection of poems, she writes with a degree of assurance that would be rare in her contemporaries of either sex on this side of the Atlantic. It is evident that she has learnt a good deal from such poets as John Crowe and Theodore Roethke: yet their influence is assimilated to Miss Plath's highly personal tone and way of looking at the world. She writes of people or natural objects in a detached yet sympathetic way, with a fastidious vocabulary and a delicate feeling for the placing of the individual word. Here is the first stanza of "Spinster," one of her most successful poems:

Now this particular girl
During a ceremonious April walk
With her latest suitor
Found herself, of a sudden, intolerably struck
By the birds' irregular babel
And the leaves' litter.

I read this collection with considerable pleasure, and I can happily recommend it to those inquiring spirits who demand at intervals if there are any new poets worth reading nowadays.

The foil of despair
Ariel, by Sylvia Plath
(Faber, 12s 6d)
By Richard Kell
March 12 1965

The poems in this book were written in the few years before Sylvia Plath died, and they convey with remarkable intensity and precision the inner violence she suffered through that period. Though sometimes complicated, they are rarely contrived: the initial obscurity is due to the fact that full and natural expression could be achieved only through images that constantly shift on currents of turbulent feeling – and yet the artist is always in control.

Although a part of her must have been clinically detached, the writer is very much involved in all her poems. They

are rich in material drawn from her physical environment – especially the organic – but they reflect a deeply subjective and original awareness of it. Yet there is no question of turning things arbitrarily into private emblems or symbols: rather an object in the natural world is felt to be vitally related to the psyche – to belong to the same continuum – and so each can speak for the other without loss of identity.

The quality of these poems leads one to the conclusion that whatever "career" Sylvia Plath had chosen to adopt it was certain to be engrossed eventually by her artistic need – which includes the need to experience life deeply – and that her poetry would have been valuable no matter what she had written about. It is worth saying this because we are under pressure nowadays to believe that poetry dealing with anything but violence must somehow be irrelevant. An artist may have to bear the burden of private or communal violence, and the violence may or may not become material for his work: but what matters ultimately is his ability to reveal in words, paint, or music that intricate wholeness which is a basic need of the whole mind.

Sylvia Plath had this ability. In some poetry the language is self-effacing, directing the reader's attention to things outside itself; but here it demands almost feverishly to be alive in its own right – tough and limber, and glowing, like a plant – sucking the world for its nourishment. Sometimes its becomes grotesquely bloated, [but] this is not to deny the relevance of the subject matter, which includes suffering. Without a meaning there could be no poem, and the artistic achievement is the more substantial because the meaning is deep and serious. But the experiences these poems are "about" become a kind of foil: if a fine poem of despair leaves the reader despairing, instead of marvelling at the power that can create something perfect out of destruction, the poet's struggle is to that extent devalued, and it is better not to read at all.

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